

Homily: Ascension Sunday  
(June 5, 2011)

*In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

As human beings we are clingers. We especially cling to that which evokes joy and erases pain – whether it is for good or for ill; life-enhancing and soul-nurturing or a potentially fatal distraction that is spirit-destroying.

We also live moment by moment. We are terrible at seeing the big picture, always losing the forest for the trees. Perhaps it is a symptom of our society this radical isolation, this disconnectedness from other humans, from nature, from ourselves even. Perhaps it is just a universal reality of a broken people who in Adam and Eve chose to reject a cosmic God and for a local god in them self.

I wonder if we even *want* to see the big picture, irrespective of what people say, especially those who live by the adage that knowledge equals power. Knowledge also equals guilt. If we look upon the larger frame of life, we will see where we have failed God and each other along with those failings of others which we seek to exploit. The big picture on display shows us all the places where we have coloured outside of the lines.

So we stick to our bubbles for the most part. We like our bubbles. We like our isolation. We seek it out and we defend it for all we are worth. We even finance it, writing a cheque to the soup kitchen instead of going down and grabbing a ladle. We cling to our bubbles as newborns might cling to the safety of the womb, fighting their birth into this world of growth, challenge and pain.

The great irony of all of this is that even though letting God break the bubble to reveal some of the larger picture *will* reveal our failings to us, the larger the picture also

puts our failings into the larger frame of God's love and mercy. So the larger the picture the smaller our failings become. In Christ our failings are penetrated by the light of grace. In Christ our guilt is rendered moot for our hope is not in what we can achieve or atone for, but in Christ who has already achieved it and atoned for it, that is our salvation.

One can imagine that the disciples would have been tempted to remain on the Mount of Olives that morning when Christ ascended to the Father. They might have been tempted to remain transfixed on the place where he disappeared from view, holding vigil until his return only to eventually succumb to disappointment and disillusionment when he didn't.

And why wouldn't they, they're human, they're clingers, they seek like us to hold on to that which gives them great joy and hope and what could carry that more than being physically present to the Son of God who has defeated death?

But, believe it or not, this desire was too small. If they had remained transfixed then their focus would have been too small. Yes, Jesus' presence is the Kingdom of God, heaven on earth, but the gift he was going to give them was first, far greater than anything they could ask or imagine and second, only able to come to them once he had returned to the Father.

To stay with them physically was not what the disciples needed in the long run. He was not theirs to hold on to. Remember he even said this to Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb on the day of his resurrection. They had to let go, because they had a mission to embark upon.

The Ascension is the point when the Church moves from being fed, to feeding; from being served to serving; from encountering to engaging. This is the moment when the disciples became apostles, that is “sent ones.”

They had to let him go so that he could empower them to go out and engage with the world, helping transfigure it into the image of Christ as agents of divine grace. They could only do this by the power of His Spirit dwelling within them, making them Christians, that is “little christs.” Or as Nicholas Farrer famously called Christians “walking sacraments” – making real the presence of Jesus to all whom we encounter.

So Ascension affords an intimacy with Christ that could not happen if he was physically present with us on earth. This is why the messengers of God command them to go back to Jerusalem and leave the mount of ascension. For by leaving they symbolically let go of anything that could become a barrier to the Spirit, which Christ was going to send them at Pentecost.

This radical kenosis or “self-emptying” is called for by St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians: “Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit...And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

The desert mothers and fathers of the second and third century also talked about the journey of faith as a way of letting go. This is highlighted in the story of Abba Sisoës:

A brother who was insulted by another brother came to Abba Sisoës, and said to him: I was hurt by my brother, and I want to avenge myself. The old man tried to console him and said: Don't do that, my child. Rather leave vengeance to God. But he said: I will not quit until I avenge

myself. Then the old man said: Let us pray, brother; and standing up, he said: O God, we no longer need you to take care of us since we now avenge ourselves. Hearing these words, the brother fell at the feet of the old man and said: I am not going to fight with my brother any more. Forgive me, Abba.

St. Thomas à Kempis put it this way in his spiritual classic *The Imitation of Christ*, "To sum up, dear friend of mine, unclench your fists, and let everything fly out of your hands. Clean yourself up nicely and stay faithful to your Creator."

A more contemporary author, Henri Nouwen, places the spiritual act of letting go into the context of prayer. The resistance to praying – that is to an authentic, vulnerable relationship with God – is like the resistance of tightly clenched fists. There is a tension, a desire to cling tightly to yourself, a greediness which betrays fear.

Nouwen tells the story of a woman who entered a psychiatric facility. She was wild, swinging at everything in sight, and frightening everyone so much that the doctors had to take everything away from her. But there was one small coin that she gripped in her fist and would not give up. In fact, it took two people to pry open her clenched hand. It was as though she would lose her very self along with the coin. If they deprived her of that coin, she would have nothing left. That was her fear.

But, Nouwen goes on to say, when we are invited to pray, when we are invited to enter into a relationship with God, we are asked to unclench our fists, to give up that last coin. It is a call to come before God with open hands, allowing God to enter the very centre of your being so that he can direct your own eyes to look upon that which you

would rather leave in darkness, to guide your hands to touch that which you would rather leave untouched so that these may be healed and transformed into that which bear life.

The journey of faith is a journey of trust, for behind each fist another one is hiding, and sometimes the process seems endless. Much has happened in your life to make all those fists. But fear not, Christ is patient. Christ will never give up on you. His Spirit is already within you, helping achieve that which you think is impossible, helping open you up to the love that first became vulnerable to you.

What do you need to give up for Christ? What are you clinging to that needs to be let go of so you may fully enjoy the life of the Spirit? These are questions each of us has to ask ourselves at many moments along the journey because the more we are clinging to that which isn't God; the less God can do through us for his world.